



Position Paper

Women demand government action: Violence against women and local government legitimacy

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A B S T R A C T

Despite improvements in legislation and many countries adopting legal frameworks that advocate for women's rights, violence against women (VAW) continues to severely threaten women's lives. The agreed conclusions of the 68th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) emphasize the need for immediate state action to eliminate gender-based violence. Drawing from previous studies showing that citizens care about government fairness in the implementation of public policy, we posit that women reporting a high incidence of VAW in their place of residence make local governments accountable for not implementing effective policies to address their safety concerns, resulting in lower local government legitimacy. We test our hypotheses using nationally representative surveys in Northern Central America, a region with some of the highest VAW rates in the world. The results show that women demand state action to eradicate VAW and when local governments do not take action to effectively protect them, women withdraw their political support.

Globally, the number of intentionally killed women reached a new record high in 2022—the highest yearly number recorded in the past 20 years. In that year, nearly 89,000 women and girls were killed and most of these deaths were gender-related (UNODC and UN WOMEN, 2023). Given the astonishingly high and widespread incidence of both lethal and non-lethal gender-based violence across the world, not surprisingly the elimination of violence against women and girls continued to emerge as a core theme in the 68th session of the Commission on the Status of Women. One of the agreed conclusions of the CSW68 reads as follows (Commission on the Status of Women Sixty-Eighth Session, 2024),

“The Commission strongly condemns all forms of violence against women and girls ... It remains deeply concerned by the magnitude of various forms of violence against women and girls ... [such violence] is a major impediment to the achievement of gender equality ... and violates and impairs or nullifies their full enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms”

The agreed CSW68 conclusions also call for state action to improve women and girls' safety in private and public spaces mandating to “enact or strengthen and enforce laws and policies to eliminate all forms of violence, discrimination, and harassment against women of all ages” (15).

Building on the policy-relevant knowledge produced in four previously co-edited academic volumes, which emerged from NGO parallel events held during sessions of the CSW (Heidensohn, 2024; Joseph, 2023; Reddock, 2022; Ranjan et al., 2020), we contribute to this new special issue by extending research-based evidence on VAW to a region of the world where this topic remains largely understudied—Northern Central America. Besides exploring the level of VAW in Northern Central American countries, we highlight the political cost for governments who do not take effective action to prevent and eradicate VAW—a risk that has grown in many countries across the world in recent years with the ascendance of anti-gender equality voices to political power encapsulated in the

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so-called “anti-gender ideology” movement (Toldy and Garraio, 2020), a “well-organized countermovement to defeat feminist and LGBTQ + policy” (Corredor, 2019, 612).

More specifically, in this article, we examine the extent of violence against women (VAW) in neighborhoods in Northern Central American countries (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras) as reported by both men and women residents, as well as the political consequences of not implementing effective security policies that account for women’s safety in their communities. Using nationally representative surveys of Northern Central American countries, we first explore citizens’ reports of the existence and seriousness of violence against women in their neighborhood and examine the most common forms that such reported violence takes. Second, we examine whether men and women make their governments accountable for violence against women in their place of residence, attributing responsibility to their local government.

Across the Global South, elected local governments have become central actors in the design and implementation of measures to eliminate VAW. An example of such involvement is UN WOMEN’s global initiative, *Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls*. This initiative encourages local governments to join forces with international and local civil society actors to implement and evaluate programs to prevent and eradicate sexual harassment in public spaces of towns and cities in coordination with the central government.¹ Given that the incidence of VAW varies across geographic areas within municipalities (Córdova, 2025), responses to this problem need the involvement of local authorities and civil society actors, who know better the territory and local conditions.

The state bears the responsibility to ensure citizen safety, making government institutions accountable for women’s right to live free of gender-based violence. While previous studies suggest that citizens attribute responsibility to central governments for the quality of services provided to violence against women survivors (Kras, 2022), one question that remains underexplored, however, is whether citizens make local governments accountable for not effectively responding to gender-based violence against women in their place of residence. Feeling safe in spaces that one cannot avoid, where one resides and interacts the most with others, is important for ensuring everyone’s wellbeing, particularly for women who are the most vulnerable to become victims of gender-based violence in these spaces. Indeed, VAW within homes and in public spaces of neighborhoods are some of the most prevalent forms of gender-based violence against women (e.g., Córdova, 2025; Lei et al., 2014), calling for the implementation of “gender-specific neighborhood prevention programs” (Lei et al., 2014, 1).

In times when “pushback” against gender equality, and therefore against public investments in gender equality policies, promoted by “anti-gender ideology” advocates is growing across the globe (e.g., UN Women, 2023; Toldy and Garraio, 2020), demonstrating that citizens penalize governments that do not address women’s concerns effectively can provide political elites with the incentives needed to act on problems that disproportionately affect women. UN WOMEN has called to “push against the pushback,” which we show women are and will most likely continue to do so. Women push back by withdrawing their support from their local government if this one does not effectively protect them from gender-based violence in their neighborhoods. When citizens perceive that women’s safety is the state’s responsibility, including local governments,’ elected officials and political candidates are more likely to have the electoral incentives to take action, as they fear that failing to address the problem can result in lower political support. In this article, we examine whether engrained VAW in one’s neighborhood (either in the form of domestic violence and/or in public spaces) erodes local government’s *legitimacy*—“the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate and proper ones for the society” (Lipset, 1983, 64).

Our main contention is that, beyond the tragic loss of women’s lives and the adverse consequences for women’s physical and mental health, gender-based violence (GBV) in one’s place of residence erodes women’s perception that local governments respond to their needs, thereby undermining local government legitimacy. Therefore, we examine the political cost for local elected leaders and political candidates of not addressing widespread GBV in the territories they intend to govern. *The results of our research highlight the importance of enacting local policies that protect women and girls from gender-based violence, and the human and political costs of inaction.*

We find that residents’ perceptions of the seriousness of VAW in their neighborhoods vary across the three countries included in our study (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras). However, in all three countries the majority of the population does report the existence of VAW in their neighborhood. In addition, we find that women living under conditions of high gender-based violence perceive their local government as less legitimate than those residing in safer communities, independent of other factors that can influence the extent of violence against women and political legitimacy, such as non-gender-based crime victimization and socio-economic status. By contrast, although men can be as likely as women to report VAW in their neighborhood, their acknowledgment of this problem does not alter their perceptions of local government.

In light of the agreed CSW68 conclusions urging states to address VAW, our contribution to this special issue on policy relevant research—emerging from the parallel NGO events during CSW68—resides in theorizing and demonstrating empirically that women demand state action to eradicate gender-based violence: holding the state accountable by withdrawing their political support when the state fails to ensure women’s safety. To the best of our knowledge, our article is the first one to explore the negative effects of VAW at the sub-municipal level on local governments’ political legitimacy.

Not only do we demonstrate that the “neighborhood” and its context is a critical unit of analysis for understanding variations in violence against women and political support across geographic spaces. This article also offers policy-relevant evidence in favor of response models that prioritize the implementation of local programs aimed at eradicating VAW, such as UN WOMEN’s global initiative, *Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls*. Importantly, however, our research underscores the need to implement a unified coordinated community response (CCR) (Ranjan and Dmello, 2022) that accounts for sub-municipal level dynamics, and

¹ For more information about UNWOMEN’s initiative, visit: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/creating-safe-public-spaces>.

therefore to integrate neighborhood-level actors into assessment and response networks.

1. Political legitimacy and violence against women

Political legitimacy is a multidimensional concept that at its core involves perceptions of government trustworthiness (e.g., Booth and Seligson, 2009). Therefore, trust in government is a central indicator of political legitimacy. Trust in government is defined as “a basic evaluative orientation toward the government founded on how well the government is operating according to people’s normative expectations” (Hetherington, 1998, 791). Congruent with this definition, numerous studies have found that citizens’ evaluations of government performance predict trust in government (e.g., Zmerli and Van der Meer, 2017). For example, previous studies show that perceived failure to deliver goods and services in a fair manner undermines trust in local government in the Latin American context (e.g., Córdova and Layton, 2016). Indeed, previous research shows that citizens not only care about governments delivering services but that they do so fairly. Citizens want their government to address their concerns, demonstrating a “lack of bias or favoritism” (Van Ryzin, 2011, 747). Therefore, to determine the trustworthiness of government, and thus its legitimacy, citizens also evaluate government performance on the basis of its *distributive fairness*, which results from evaluations of whether authorities are providing the goods or services that a given person deserves (e.g., Levi and Stoker, 2000).

We theorize that when public security approaches do not include programs or make it also a priority to improve women’s safety, women will penalize their local government for not responding to their particular needs—that is, women will perceive local governments’ distribution of services as unfair. Further, we posit that trust in local government will decline proportionally to women’s perceived seriousness of VAW in neighborhoods, given that they see government inaction or failure to contain widespread VAW as particularly threatening to their physical and psychological wellbeing. Finally, we posit that, although men are likely to recognize and report high incidence of VAW in neighborhoods, this will not manifest in lower evaluations of local government trustworthiness due to self-interest inclinations (Barnes and Córdova, 2016) and an overall tendency to normalize VAW in patriarchal societies drawn from sexist attitudes (Krivoshechekov et al., 2023). For men, other factors will have a heavier weight when deciding how much trust they have in their local government, particularly those they perceive as more directly affecting their wellbeing. Such factors can include the perceived risk of becoming direct victims of non-gender crimes and perceptions of the economy.

Indeed, previous research shows that perceived self-interest largely drives preferences for public policy, including gender equality policies (Barnes and Córdova, 2016) and assessments of government performance (e.g., Meltzer and Richard, 1981; Sears and Funk, 1990). For example, Córdova and Kras (2020) show that while men appear indifferent to the implementation of women’s police stations to address VAW, women perceive the police as more legitimate when those specialized units exist in their town. Extant research also demonstrates that individuals who do not hold gender equality attitudes, demonstrating sexist inclinations, are also less likely to support policies that benefit women—an attitudinal predisposition much more pronounced among men (e.g., Barnes and Córdova, 2016). In short, we test the following hypotheses.

H1. Women who report VAW as a serious problem in their neighborhood will express lower trust in local government, independent of other factors that can influence VAW and political legitimacy, such as socio-economic status and non-gender crime victimization.

H2. Reporting VAW as a serious problem in their neighborhood will not alter men’s trust in local government.

H3. Men will form their opinions of local government trustworthiness on the basis of other factors perceived as more directly affecting them, such as the risk of becoming victims of non-gender crimes or negative perceptions of the economy.

2. Violence against women: central America in comparative perspective

According to the most recent data available, in 2022 there were at least 4,050 femicides in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC)—or the equivalent to one gender-related killing of a woman every 2 hours (ECLAC, 2023). Northern Central American countries, particularly Honduras and El Salvador, show some of the highest femicide rates across the LAC region. Honduras ranks as the country with the highest femicide rate and El Salvador ranks third. While the ECLAC reports a slight decline in femicide rates in Guatemala and El Salvador compared to 2021, as well as in Bolivia, it concludes that, “it is not possible to identify an upward or downward trend in the rates of femicide or feminicide in each country, since the variations are small and do not reflect an increase or decrease in the problem,” adding that “the available information shows the persistence of femicide” (4).

The persistence of femicide is exemplified by the case of El Salvador, where between 2023 and 2024 at least 130 women were killed due to their gender (ORMUSA, 2024), surpassing the average annual number registered by the ECLAC in 2022, equal to 53. Despite a sharp decline in homicide rates (Infosegura, 2023), femicide rates remain high in the country, making El Salvador one of the most dangerous nations for women in the region. Further, as the case of El Salvador shows, non-lethal violence against women is also very high in Northern Central American countries. In El Salvador, between June 2023 and May 2024, at least 20,950 cases of gender-based violence against women occurred in the country, equivalent to 57 daily reported incidents (Cañenguez, 2024). This number represents a 15 percentage-point increase compared to the same period the previous year. For a small country with around 3.5 million women and girls, these numbers are very high and most likely underestimated given high underreporting rates.

Violence against women is also widespread in Guatemala. In this country, reports for 2022 document a daily average of 19 rapes and 170 assaults of women and girls. Moreover, during the same year, at least one woman or girl died violently in Guatemala every day, and their killing was more brutal than that of men (Infosegura, 2023). In Honduras, non-lethal violence against women is also very high with an annual average of 8,028 reported cases of domestic violence and 3,166 of sexual violence between 2019 and 2022

(Infosegura, 2023).

Over the past two decades, territorial control of organized criminal organizations has increased women's vulnerability to gender-based violence in neighborhoods in Northern Central America (e.g., Córdova, 2025; Velásquez Estrada, 2022). To combat gang-violence, governments in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras resorted to "iron-fist" security policies. This security approach has relied on the deployment of the military and militarized police units in neighborhoods to curb gang activity and territorial control (Wolf, 2017; Malone and Dammert, 2021), which has increased women's risk of gender-based violence in the hands of state armed actors (e.g., Beltrán Luna, 2023). The implementation of iron fist security policies has coincided with reports of government negotiations with criminal organizations (e.g., Avelar, 2023), and as the case of Honduras clearly illustrates, the collusion of government officials with organized criminal groups or their direct involvement in illicit activities, such as drug trafficking. To illustrate this point, in June of 2024, former president of Honduras, Juan Orlando Hernández, was sentenced to 540 months in prison and 60 months of supervised release for cocaine importation and related weapons offenses (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024).

In these contexts, violence against women is not solely explained by cultural norms supportive of hostile sexism, which are typically associated with low socio-economic status, but also by broader dynamics of violence associated to the actions of organized crime and state armed actors that target women (Córdova, 2025). Indeed, the findings of previous quantitative research for Northern Central American countries suggests that, two neighborhoods with similarly high poverty levels and a sexist culture can depict very different levels of gender-based violence against women. More specifically, neighborhoods with higher incidence of organized crime and militarized interventions, on average, show higher violence against women rates, independent of poverty and social norms (Córdova, 2025). As in civil and inter-state war contexts, violence against women is also used as a "weapon of war" in criminal conflicts (Córdova, 2025).

Further, Córdova (2025) demonstrates that in Northern Central America widespread impunity in neighborhoods with high incidence of organized crime and militarized state responses increases women's vulnerability to intimate partner violence (IPV). As both non-state and state armed actors engage in sexual violence against women in neighborhoods controlled by organized crime, women survivors of all forms of gender-based violence, including IPV, are less likely to turn to the police for help in these neighborhoods. In short, in Northern Central American countries, reporting a high incidence of VAW in one's neighborhood is typically associated with organized criminal organizations' territorial control and/or the militarization of its territory. These findings suggest that in Northern Central America reporting high levels of VAW in one's neighborhood is not simply capturing neighborhoods' socio-economic characteristics but distinct dynamics of broader state and non-state violence that targets women.

Previous studies have noted the urgent need of implementing public security programs in Northern Central America that account for the specific ways that women and girls experience violence, calling for the coordination of efforts between institutions working on public security and addressing gender-based violence (InfoSegura, 2020). However, anti-gender equality discourses and policies, often supported by individuals mobilizing against "gender ideology" (e.g., Toldy and Garraio, 2020), are undermining efforts to significantly improve women and girls' safety in the region, including that of transgender women (Ramazzini, 2024).

The participation of women's organizations, and other members of civil society advocating for women's rights, in the formulation and supervision of public policy implementation is critical to make the state accountable for the protection of women's human rights. Institutionalizing mechanisms for such accountability is important for ensuring governmental action to address women and girls' needs (InfoSegura, 2020). In this article, we demonstrate that ordinary women are making governments accountable through a different channel: *withdrawing political support from local governments that fail to effectively protect them from gender-based violence in their place of residence*.

3. Data and methods

We rely on survey data collected in the summer of 2022 by Vanderbilt University's Latin American Public Opinion (Latin American Public Opinion Project LAPOP, 2022) Lab as part of its AmericasBarometer project, funded through a grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development, that explicitly sought to assess the conditions confronted by Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Hondurans. The surveys were carried out between July 7 and October 9 of 2022, with the number of face-to-face interviews in Guatemala (N = 1,205), El Salvador (N = 1,138), and Honduras (N = 1,183), adding up to 3,526 observations. The sample design for all three surveys provides nationally representative data of voting age adults (18 or older), relying on a multi-stage probabilistic design stratified by major regions of the country, size of municipality, and urban and rural areas within the municipalities.

To analyze the data, we proceed as follows. Using data from the LAPOP project, we first provide descriptive information about our key predictor variable, *perceived seriousness of violence against women (VAW) in one's neighborhood*. Next, we examine the validity of this measure and explore the specific types of gender-based violence that occur in neighborhoods where citizens are reporting VAW. Second, using the LAPOP data, we examine the extent to which women and men in Northern Central America trust their local government. Finally, to examine the effect of reported VAW in neighborhoods on trust in local government, we estimate regression models that account for a series of other variables that can simultaneously influence VAW and individuals' perceptions of local government legitimacy. More specifically, the regression analyses allow us to inspect the differential impact of gender on trust in the local government across varied contexts with different reported levels of VAW, while holding constant other potential confounding variables.

3.1. Key predictor variable: perceived violence against women in neighborhoods

The LAPOP survey question that measures the existence and seriousness of VAW in individuals' neighborhoods reads as follows: *"Now I am going to read to you a list of situations that may or may not be a problem in some communities or neighborhoods. Please tell me if*

violence against women is a very serious problem, somewhat serious, not serious, not serious at all, or not a problem in your community or neighborhood.” Figs. 1 and 2 show our first set of descriptive analyses of this variable. To ease the interpretation of these first results, we recoded the response options to this question into three categories: (1) “VAW is not a problem,” (2) “VAW is not serious or not serious at all,” and (3) “VAW is a somewhat or very serious problem.” Fig. 1 shows the frequency distribution of this variable across countries.

First, we notice that the majority of the population in the three countries report some degree of VAW in their neighborhood. Those responding that “VAW is not a problem” in their neighborhood constitute less than 50 percent of the population in each country. Further, when assessing the seriousness of VAW, about two in ten citizens in El Salvador (18 %) and Honduras (20 %) say that VAW in their neighborhood is a somewhat or very serious problem. This number is higher in Guatemala where about three in ten citizens (31 %) perceive a high incidence of VAW. In general, a high percentage of respondents reports VAW in their neighborhood to some degree, even if not perceived as serious.

Fig. 2 presents the results by gender. We observe that both men and women acknowledge VAW in their neighborhoods. More specifically, we observe in Fig. 2 that the percentage of men and women in each category of the VAW variable is similar. Further statistical tests confirm that differences between men and women are not statistically significant across all categories (we present these results in online appendix 1). For example, while 26 percent of women in the region report that VAW is a very or somewhat serious problem in their neighborhood, around 21 percent of men have the same opinion—however, the difference between these two percentages is not statistically significant. Overall, these results indicate that both men and women are highly knowledgeable of the existence of VAW as well as its seriousness in neighborhoods across the three countries. Taken together, this first set of results highlights the salience of the issue among men and women at the sub-municipal level, providing further evidence of the high levels of VAW in this region and underscoring its sub-municipal nature—that is, neighborhoods constitute an important analytical geographic unit to understand patterns of VAW.

3.2. Examining the validity of the survey question on VAW in neighborhoods

What kind of gender-based violence are citizens reporting when they state that “violence against women” occurs in the neighborhood? Are citizens mainly referring to gender-based violence in public spaces of their neighborhood and/or are they also reporting domestic violence? Or is this survey item mainly capturing residents’ socio-economic characteristics associated with neighborhood violence, rather than measuring VAW per se? To ensure that our core predictor variable is indeed meaningful and therefore capturing VAW occurrence, we examine these questions empirically.

Arguably, citizens are more likely to witness violence that occurs in public spaces. However, when domestic violence on the basis of gender, which mainly corresponds to intimate partner violence (IPV), escalates, neighbors can become aware (i.e., yelling, beating, breaking, and killing within homes can become public knowledge). Further, neighbors can learn about IPV from survivors’ accounts or others knowledgeable about such violence. To examine the kind of violence that citizens are reporting when they answer a general question on the prevalence of violence against women in their neighborhood, we turn to a complementary data source, an original online 2023 survey conducted in El Salvador (Córdova, 2023).

Similar to the LAPOP survey, the original survey in El Salvador asked a general question on perceptions of violence against women in the neighborhood, plus other specific questions on the incidence of IPV in the place of residence as well as lifetime personal experiences with sexual harassment in the hands of organized criminal groups or state armed actors in the neighborhood. We provide more information about the online survey and show the results of these complementary analyses in online appendix 2. We find that when people respond positively to the question on VAW in their neighborhood, they also are much more likely to report IPV and sexual harassment committed by state and non-state armed actors that occurs in their place of residence. Taken together, these findings suggest that when citizens answer the general LAPOP question on the existence and seriousness of violence against women, they are referring to actual knowledge they have about the occurrence of VAW—including instances of IPV, which despite tending to predominantly occur within household walls, individuals become largely aware of it.

To further examine the extent to which the LAPOP question asking about VAW in one’s neighborhood might still capture residents’ socio-economic characteristics often associated with the propensity of neighborhood violence, rather than VAW as such, we run regression models separately for men and women. Using the LAPOP data, these models examine the socio-economic predictors of perceived VAW in the neighborhood. We present these results in online appendix 3.² We find that socio-economic factors such as household wealth and perceptions of the national and personal economy do not predict either men or women’s reports of VAW in their neighborhood. Instead of economic factors, women’s age and civil status are more likely to predict reports of VAW—single and younger women are more likely to report serious VAW in their neighborhood than older women with partners. These results suggest that many women interviewees might be reporting on their own personal lifetime experiences with sexual harassment in public spaces, a type of gender-based violence that disproportionally affect younger and therefore single women.

Men’s reports on VAW in their neighborhood are mainly determined by higher levels of education, suggesting that educated men are more likely to recognize aggressions against women as actual violence. By contrast, men with low levels of education tend to

² As shown in online appendix 3, these models correspond to ordered logit models with the LAPOP variable asking about the incidence of VAW in one’s neighborhood. We used the recoded version of this variable, which has three categories: (1) “VAW is not a problem,” (2) “VAW is not serious or not serious at all,” and (3) “VAW is a somewhat or very serious problem.” Given the categorical and incremental nature of this variable, an ordered logit model is more appropriate in this case. For a more detailed explanation on when it is appropriate to use ordered logit models and literature references, see the modeling description in the next section, titled, “Outcome Variable: Trust in Local Government.”

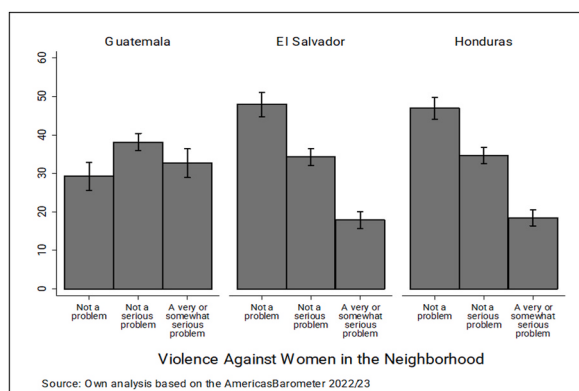


Fig. 1. Perceived seriousness of violence against women by country.

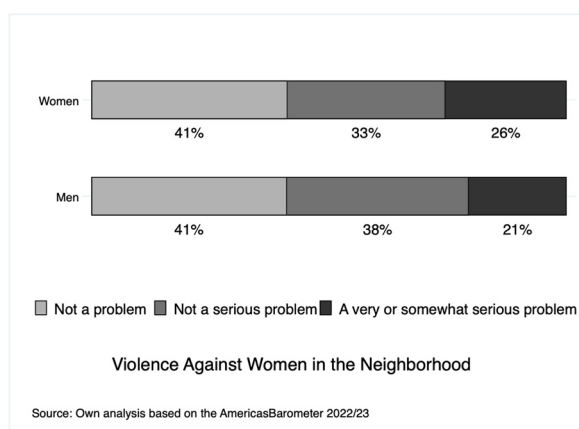


Fig. 2. Perceived Seriousness of Violence Against Women by Gender (Pooled sample across countries).

normalize such violence and do not identify it as such. These findings further provide evidence that the general LAPOP question on VAW in one's neighborhood is not simply capturing individuals' or neighborhoods' socio-economic characteristics, but actual gender-based violence that occurs in these sub-municipal units, particularly IPV and sexual harassment by state and non-state armed actors.

3.3. Outcome variable: trust in local government

We employ a question in the LAPOP survey on trust in local government as a proxy measure of political legitimacy. The question in the survey asks: "To what extent do you trust the local or municipal government?". Response options are based on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means "not at all" and 7 means "a lot."

Fig. 3 shows that the average level of trust in local government is the highest among Salvadorans at 4.9, followed by Hondurans at 4.2, and Guatemalans at 3.8. Overall, differences across countries in trust in local government are not very large. Further, in Fig. 4, when we split the sample by gender, we observe very small (statistically insignificant) differences in the average level of trust in local government between men and women in each country. Further analyses using the pooled dataset confirmed that, on average, there is not a statistically significant gender gap in trust in local government in the region.³ An important question is whether different factors influence men and women's views about government legitimacy, despite similar overall levels of trust in local government. We argue that this is the case. To identify such factors, and the specific effect of reported VAW in one's neighborhood, we turn to our multivariate statistical analysis.

4. Multivariate statistical analysis: exploring the predictors of trust in local government

Besides our key predictor variable (i.e., perceived seriousness of VAW in the place of residence), our statistical analysis controls for

³ We present this analysis in online [appendix 1](#).

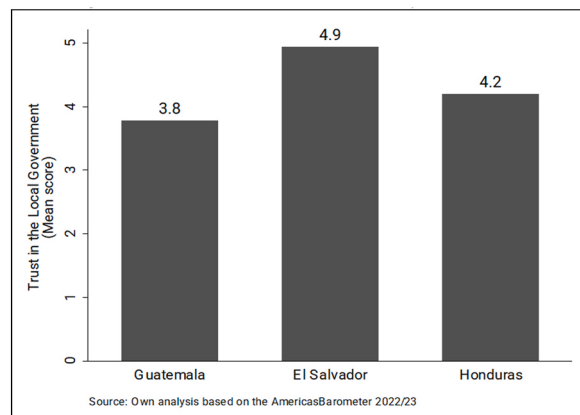


Fig. 3. Trust in the local government by gender and country.

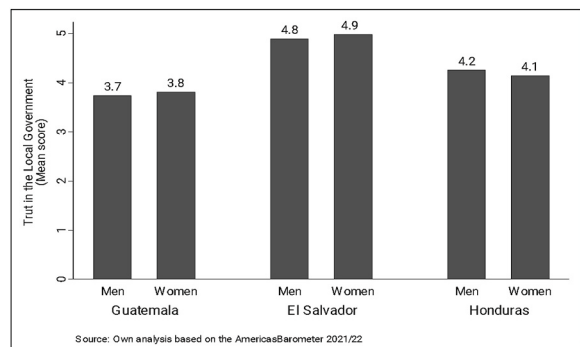


Fig. 4. Trust in the local government by gender and country.

variables that can potentially influence both violence against women reports and trust in the local government, including one's personal experiences with crime and corruption victimization, fear of crime victimization, perceptions of the national and personal economy, and socio-demographic characteristics (i.e., age, education, urban or rural status, and a measure of personal wealth computed using household assets).⁴ In addition, our statistical analysis controls for a variable indicating whether respondents voted for the incumbent president or not to evaluate if one's support for the national government influences trust in the local government. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for all the variables included in the statistical models. The exact question wording of each variable is shown in online appendix 4.

To increase our statistical power and be able to break down the sample by gender, our multivariate statistical analysis relies on the pooled dataset, adding fixed effects at the country level. The key predictor variable is the recoded question asking about the existence of VAW in one's neighborhood and its seriousness: (1) "VAW is not a problem," (2) "VAW is not serious or not serious at all," and (3) "VAW is a somewhat or very serious problem." Given that the outcome variable, trust in local government, relies on a scale from 1 to 7, we estimate ordered logit models to better capture the distribution of this variable. Ordered logit models are appropriate when the outcome variable is ordinal and increments on the scale are assumed equal (Liu, 2016)—in our case, a one-unit point increase from 1 to 7. Therefore, in contrast to traditional ordinary least square (OLS) regressions, which (most often unrealistically) assume a continuous dependent variable, an ordered logit regression better models the ordinal nature of our outcome variable. Further, given that the LAPOP data relies on sample designs that use a clustering and stratification strategy, we estimate ordered logit models accounting for the survey design (Heeringa et al., 2017).

First, we explore the average effect of perceived seriousness of VAW in the neighborhood on trust in local government. As shown in Model 1 (see Table 2), we do not detect a statistically significant effect of perceived VAW on trust in local government, at least on average. At first glance, this null result suggests that, when determining their views of local government legitimacy, citizens do not take into account the performance of local government in addressing VAW in their neighborhood, and thus their municipality. The results

⁴ For the methodology employed to measure personal wealth, see Córdova (2009): https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights/10806en_v2.pdf. Because individuals and neighborhoods are affected by all forms of violence might also be economically disadvantage, we control for variables capturing socio-economic status. This approach helps us isolate the effect of perceived VAW in neighborhoods from potential confounding effects deriving from economic factors.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics: Variables included in models from the LAPOP 2022 survey.

	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Trust in local government	3,471	4.302	2.001	1	7
Violence Against Women in Neighborhood (VAW)					
It is not a problem	3,426	0.411	0.492	0	1
It is not at all or not a serious problem	3,426	0.357	0.479	0	1
It is a very or somewhat serious problem	3,426	0.232	0.422	0	1
Victim of Crime	3,522	0.133	0.340	0	1
Fear of crime in Neighborhood	3,440	2.050	0.959	1	4
Victim of corruption by public official	3,518	0.035	0.184	0	1
Voting					
Didn't Vote	3,511	0.331	0.471	0	1
Didn't Vote for Incumbent	3,511	0.291	0.454	0	1
Voted for Incumbent	3,511	0.378	0.485	0	1
Perception of Country's Economic Situation					
Better	3,498	0.135	0.342	0	1
Same	3,498	0.240	0.427	0	1
Worse	3,498	0.625	0.484	0	1
Perception of Personal Economic Situation	3,511			0	1
Better	3,511	0.165	0.371	0	1
Same		0.390	0.488		
Worse	3,511	0.445	0.497	0	1
Levels of Wealth (household assets)	3,487	3.034	1.426	1	5
Age Groups					
18-29	3,526	0.390	0.488	0	1
30-49	3,526	0.381	0.486	0	1
50-64	3,526	0.141	0.348	0	1
65+	3,526	0.088	0.283	0	1
Education Levels					
No education	3,519	0.084	0.277	0	1
Primary	3,519	0.336	0.472	0	1
Secondary	3,519	0.417	0.493	0	1
Superior	3,519	0.163	0.369	0	1
Marital Status					
Single	3,519	0.357	0.479	0	1
Married/Civil Union	3,519	0.561	0.496	0	1
Divorced/Separated/Widow	3,519	0.082	0.275	0	1
Rural	3,526	0.449	0.497	0	1
Country					
Guatemala	3,526	0.342	0.474	0	1
El Salvador	3,526	0.323	0.468	0	1
Honduras	3,526	0.336	0.472	0	1

shown in Model 1 suggest that other factors have a stronger effect on trust in local government. On average, respondents' overall experience with non-gender crimes, such as robbery, burglary, assault, fraud, blackmail, and extortion, lowers trust in local government as it does fear of crime victimization. Similarly, corruption victimization (i.e., having been asked for a bribe) erodes trust in government as well as having a negative perception of the personal and national economy. While gender does not predict trust in local government, at least on average, other socio-demographic variables appear more influential, including age and education. In short, this first set of results suggests that gender related variables do not play a significant role in predicting trust in local government. Yet, as we show next, when we explore the interaction between gender identity and the perceived seriousness of VAW in one's neighborhood, we find that gender is crucial for understanding citizens' evaluations of local government legitimacy.

Model 2 in Table 2 introduces an interaction term between respondents' gender and the VAW variable. As can be observed, the interaction effect is highly statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). Based on Model 2, we estimate the predicted probability of positing a high level of trust in the local government (5, 6 or 7 points on the 1–7 scale) across the values of the VAW variable by gender.

In Fig. 5, we observe that women's probability of expressing high trust in local government varies depending on perceived VAW in their neighborhood. More specifically, this probability decreases significantly from 53 percent, when women say VAW is not a problem, to 46 percent, when women perceive VAW as a very or somewhat serious problem—representing a 7 percent decrease. By contrast, the probability of men trusting the local government shows an apparent increase as one moves from the lowest to the highest point on the VAW variable, going from 47 to 52 percent, but this slight increase is not statistically significant, as we show next.

Fig. 6 displays the statistical significance of changes in the predicted probability of trust in local government at each point of the VAW variable compared to a baseline category, which corresponds to the answer option of not perceiving VAW as a problem in the neighborhood. If 95 percent confidence intervals do not cross the line representing the zero value, a given difference is statistically significant. Compared to the baseline category, we observe that women perceiving VAW as a problem results in a lower statistically significant probability of trusting the local government (see Fig. 6). Yet, variations in the probability of trusting the local government across the VAW variable are not statistically significant for men. In short, among women, as the perceived seriousness of VAW increases, this leads to a statistically significant decline in the probability of trusting the local government, while for men, the probability

Table 2

Ordered logit models examining the effect of reported seriousness of violence against women in neighborhood on trust in local government.

	MODEL 1	MODEL 2	MODEL 3 (Women)	MODEL 4 (Men)
Violence Against Women in the Neighborhood (1–3)	–0.032 (0.049)	0.097 (0.063)	–0.140* (0.064)	0.086 (0.069)
Women (=1; Men = 0)	0.107 (0.068)	0.582*** (0.165)	– –	– –
Women * Violence against Women in neighborhood (1–3)		–0.258** (0.083)	– –	– –
Victim of Crime (Yes = 1; No Victim = 0)	–0.275** (0.098)	–0.276** (0.099)	–0.423** (0.139)	–0.153 (0.139)
Fear of crime in Neighborhood (1–4)	–0.275*** (0.042)	–0.274*** (0.042)	–0.273*** (0.058)	–0.278*** (0.059)
Victim of corruption by public official (Yes = 1; No Victim = 0)	–0.521*** (0.153)	–0.517*** (0.153)	–0.493+ (0.285)	–0.575** (0.205)
Didn't Vote for Incumbent (=1; Didn't Vote = 0)	0.210** (0.079)	0.218** (0.079)	0.243* (0.119)	0.243* (0.120)
Voted for Incumbent (=1; Didn't Vote = 0)	0.096 (0.080)	0.102 (0.080)	0.046 (0.114)	0.185 (0.127)
Perception of Country's Economic Situation (Same = 1; Better = 0)	–0.337** (0.129)	–0.331* (0.129)	–0.081 (0.184)	–0.554** (0.173)
Perception of Country's Economic Situation (Worse = 1; Better = 0)	–0.468*** (0.129)	–0.461*** (0.128)	–0.353* (0.177)	–0.570** (0.176)
Perception of Personal Economic Situation (Same = 1; Better = 0)	–0.146 (0.089)	–0.157+ (0.088)	–0.277* (0.132)	–0.030 (0.124)
Perception of Personal Economic Situation (Worse = 1; Better = 0)	–0.275** (0.105)	–0.285** (0.104)	–0.437** (0.152)	–0.126 (0.145)
Levels of Wealth (1–5)	–0.027 (0.029)	–0.027 (0.029)	0.010 (0.039)	–0.064+ (0.037)
Ages 18–29 (=1; Ages 65+ = 0)	0.333* (0.140)	0.347* (0.141)	0.289 (0.247)	0.456* (0.198)
Ages 30–49 (=1; Ages 65+ = 0)	–0.065 (0.128)	–0.051 (0.130)	–0.053 (0.238)	–0.039 (0.176)
Ages 50–64 (=1; Ages 65+ = 0)	–0.019 (0.143)	–0.017 (0.143)	0.155 (0.257)	–0.214 (0.204)
Primary (=1; No education = 0)	0.114 (0.181)	0.120 (0.183)	0.073 (0.244)	0.231 (0.292)
Secondary (=1; No education = 0)	–0.141 (0.193)	–0.148 (0.194)	–0.299 (0.246)	0.068 (0.292)
Superior (=1; No education = 0)	–0.515** (0.197)	–0.523** (0.197)	–0.714* (0.275)	–0.287 (0.291)
Single (=1; Married/Civil Union = 0)	0.030 (0.076)	0.029 (0.076)	0.015 (0.102)	0.005 (0.114)
Divorced/Separated/Widow (=1; Married/Civil Union = 0)	–0.150 (0.134)	–0.162 (0.135)	–0.207 (0.175)	–0.058 (0.217)
Rural (=1; Urban = 0)	0.144+ (0.083)	0.141+ (0.083)	0.008 (0.110)	0.293** (0.103)
El Salvador (=1; Guatemala = 0)	0.877*** (0.115)	0.881*** (0.116)	0.877*** (0.139)	0.901*** (0.146)
Honduras (=1; Guatemala = 0)	0.354*** (0.105)	0.355*** (0.105)	0.271* (0.137)	0.450** (0.143)
Number of observations	3,212	3,212	1,583	1,629
Number of strata	17	17	17	17
Number of clusters	191	191	191	191

+p < 0.10; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001 (standard errors in parenthesis). Order logit models.

remains statistically intact. Men's perceived seriousness of VAW in the neighborhood does not significantly influence their trust in local government, despite their similar likelihood of reporting such violence compared to women. Taken together, these results support our first two hypotheses, H1 and H2.

Further analyses indicate that the trends we observe in Fig. 5 result in a statistically significant gender gap in the probability of trusting the local government depending on the extent of perceived VAW in one's neighborhood. Thus, we uncover that such a gap exists once we account for perceived VAW in the place of residence.

Fig. 7 examines the direction and statistical significance of observed differences between men and women in the probability of trusting the local government across the VAW variable. Specifically, when both men and women perceive that VAW is not a problem in their neighborhood, women are more likely than men to trust their local government, resulting in a positive gender gap in trust in local government. In other words, women reward their local government more than men with higher political support when they report that VAW is not a problem. By contrast, women penalize local governments for not addressing VAW effectively, as suggested by the negative and statistically significant gender gap in trust in local government when they report VAW as a somewhat or very serious problem. While men's probability of trusting the local government remains intact across levels of perceived VAW, women's trust in

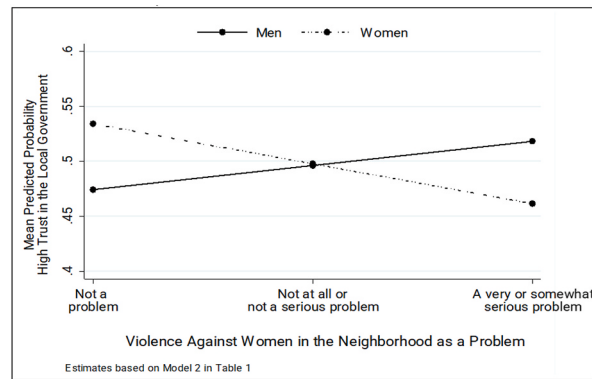


Fig. 5. Mean Predicted Probability of High Trust in the Local Government by Perceived seriousness of VAW and Gender.

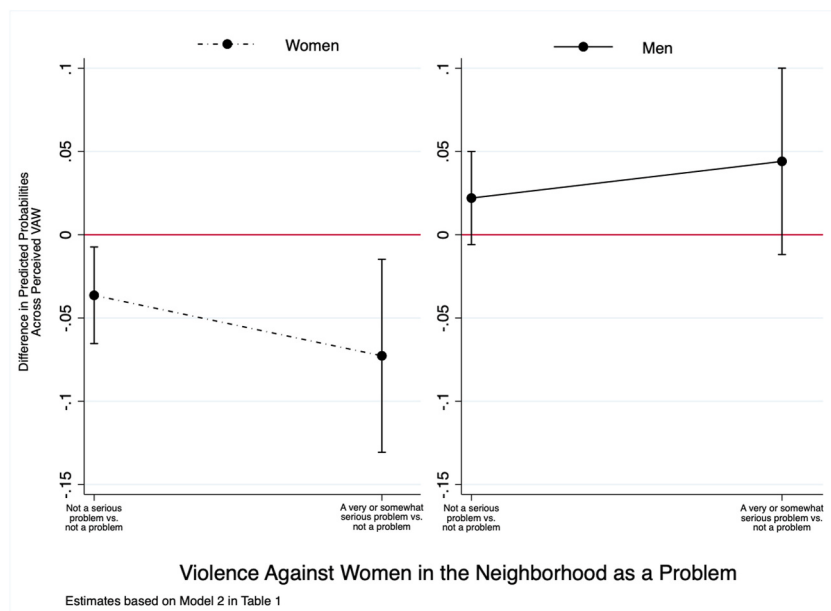


Fig. 6. Difference in Mean Predicted Probabilities of High Trust in the Local Government across perceived VAW by Gender (baseline category is “VAW is not a problem”).

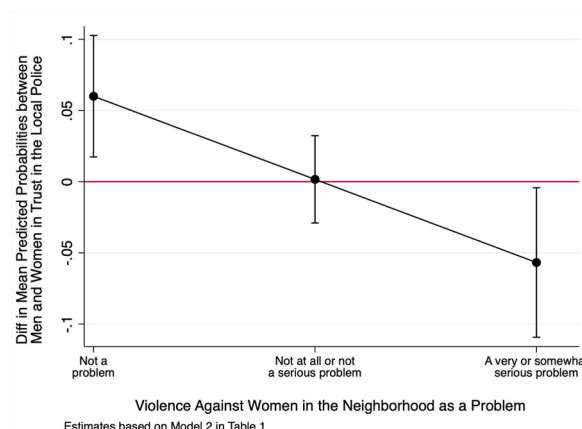


Fig. 7. Difference in mean predicted probabilities of high trust in the local government between men and women by VAW

local government is lower under conditions of high VAW in the neighborhood.

If perceived seriousness of VAW does not influence men's views of local government legitimacy, the question remains, what factors then account for men's trust in local government? Moreover, we ask what additional factors shape trust in local government among women, besides perceived VAW in the neighborhood? To explore these questions, we ran separate models for men and women (see Models 3 and 4 in Table 2). First, we confirm the results we presented in Model 2. We observe that perceived VAW in the neighborhood negatively affects women's trust in local government, while this variable does not exert an effect among men. Further, we find that men's level of trust in local government is mainly driven by fear of becoming a victim of crime in the neighborhood, their assessments of the economy, and their experiences with corruption victimization. That is, as H3 predicts, men's trust in local government is mainly influenced by factors they perceived to affect them directly rather than violence against women. We also find additional distinct factors that influence women's trust in local government. Women who report having been a victim of non-gender crimes are significantly less likely to trust the local government than women who don't report the same experience. However, crime victimization does not have an effect on men's trust in local government, although fear of crime victimization does. In addition, we do not find that experiences with corruption victimization affect women's perceived political trustworthiness at conventional statistically significant levels, while this effect is significant for men. Further research needs to examine the differential impact of direct experiences with non-gender crimes and corruption among men and women.

In general, our results highlight the importance of accounting for individuals' gender when explaining public opinion on government legitimacy. Men and women put more or less weight on varied factors when evaluating local government performance and determining the extent of its legitimacy. Women highly value living in spaces free of gender-based violence and when it does not occur, which is frequently the case, they sanction local governments with lower political support.

5. Conclusion

The agreed conclusions of the CSW68 emphasize the need for state action to eliminate VAW and therefore guarantee women's right to live a life free of all forms of violence. In Latin America and the Caribbean, VAW remains extremely high, partly driven by women's experiences with gender-based violence in Northern Central American countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras). Both organized crime and the militarization of public security have increased women's risk of gender-based violence in this region. Iron-fist security policies relying on the military and militarized police to curb organized crime have not responded, unfortunately, to women's security. Femicides and non-lethal violence against women remains high in these countries even when homicide rates have declined.

As we show in this article, the majority of men and women in Northern Central American countries report VAW in their neighborhoods, which underscores the importance of implementing local strategies to eliminate this form of violence. Women expect their local governments to take action and help eradicate gender-based violence. Northern Central American women are calling their local governments to improve their safety. Indeed, our results indicate that, when women perceive that their local governments are failing to act on or implement effective strategies to protect women, their perceived local government legitimacy declines sharply. Women decide the extent to which they can trust their local government largely based on the information they have about the prevalence and seriousness of VAW in their neighborhood. When women perceive such violence to be serious, their level of trust in local government reaches the lowest point, resulting in a negative gender gap of perceived local government trustworthiness. Even when men acknowledge serious VAW in their neighborhoods, this information does not alter their level of trust in local government.

Our results carry important policy implications not only for countries in Northern Central America but also for those in other regions of the world affected by high levels of gender-based violence against women. First, as VAW is widespread across the globe, there is an urgent need for governments to embrace democratic principles and thus support and implement measures that promote gender equality, including VAW prevention and eradication programs. Rather than engaging in "anti-gender ideology" crusades and therefore in anti-gender equality rhetoric and actions, governments should advocate for the safety of people of all genders and invest the resources needed to implement security policies that account for women's experiences with gender-based violence. As this research suggests, political parties and local candidates are more likely to earn women's political support when they respond to women's needs and implement effective measures to address gender-based violence. Women politically reward local governments that care for their safety and penalize those that do not.

To effectively counter resistance and mobilize governments in advocating for a world free of gender-based violence—and for gender equality more broadly—men's support for women's causes is also crucial. If action is not taken, allied men will also withdraw their political support. However, as the results of our study suggests, to mobilize men to "push against the pushback," it requires a fundamental attitudinal shift among men in favor of women's rights. Therefore, we echo the recommendations of articles published in previous special issues, drawing on the conclusions of past CSW meetings. While legal strategies play a crucial role, they are insufficient on their own to eradicate VAW. An integral approach to VAW needs to address the root causes of men's violence (Peacock, 2022), namely sexist attitudes that normalize gender-based violence—not only among ordinary citizens but also within state and non-state armed institutions whose members are by and large men, who frequently embrace militarized masculinities and endorse VAW as a weapon of war or criminal conflict. The implementation of evidence-based education and media campaigns that seek to improve attitudes toward women among the public, particularly among men, is imperative to generate an attitudinal change supportive of women's right. Yet, so long as governments continue to rely on militarized approaches to respond to domestic security threats, which typically lead to massive human rights abuses, violence against women will not significantly decline.

Further, the results of our research directly speak to articles in previous special issues that call for a unified global framework of "coordinated community response," understood as "an effectively organized group of people living in a particular area, who are reacting to [VAW]" (Ranjan and Dmello, 2022). UN WOMEN's global initiative, Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls

is an example of a coordinated community response (CCR) mainly at the city or municipality level. However, our results highlight the importance of extending networks of CCR at the sub-municipal or sub-city level. Individuals' neighborhoods are an important unit of analysis to understand the dynamics of structural violence that explain variation across sub-municipal geographies. As geographic units where women and girls interact more frequently with others, including relatives, acquaintances, and state and non-state armed actors, neighborhoods become an important context that can either protect women or exacerbate the risk of gender-based violence in public spaces or within homes. Therefore, programs aimed at ending VAW that follow a coordinated community response (CCR) strategy need to consider the "neighborhood" as a relevant community. Empowering neighborhood leaders and their communities at large will facilitate coordination between these and other key actors, and therefore the implementation of an actual unified response to gender-based violence that accounts for individuals' local knowledge about their place of residence.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Abby Córdova: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Diana Orcés:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Data curation.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcrj.2025.100750>.

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